

Tending the Light
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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First Lesson: Psalm 112:1-10

- ¹ Praise the Lord!
Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.
- ² Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
- ³ Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.
- ⁴ They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
- ⁵ It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.
- ⁶ For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.
- ⁷ They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.
- ⁸ Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
- ⁹ They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures for ever;
their horn is exalted in honor.
- ¹⁰ The wicked see it and are angry;
they gnash their teeth and melt away;
the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Second Lesson: Matthew 5:13-20

- ¹³ ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.
- ¹⁴ ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.
- ¹⁷ ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Yesterday I attended a memorial service for a 19-year-old woman, whom I had the honor of confirming years ago. The word most frequently used by family and friends to describe her was “sassy.” It’s the same word that comes to my mind when I think of her. Not sassy in a “sass back” kind

of way but sassy as in a girl-who-is-confident-in-herself kind of way. She was full of energy. She was full of imagination. She was full of light. She brought light with her wherever she went. This isn't to paint her as a saint. She was simply one of those people who, even when defiant, was bursting with life.

This, this, is the life that is light in our scriptures. We read of people who rise in the darkness as a light for the upright. We read that we should let our light shine before others. To what end? Both in the psalm and the gospel, the purpose is for God's glory. It could be easy to hear hints of a prosperity gospel in the psalm, the language used to describe a theology that says if we are good, God will reward us with wealth. But wait. While we read that those who fear the Lord, those who greatly delight in God's commandments, will be mighty, and have wealth and riches, the psalm does not stop there. They don't receive just to receive. They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness, that of those who share what they have received, endures for ever.

Let's step back for a second to the first verse: Happy are those who fear the Lord. "Fear of the Lord" is not the same as fear. "Fear of the Lord" is a word of its own, with a separate meaning. To have "fear of the Lord" means to be in awe of God, trusting in the stability of one who is greater and who has a plan. If I have such trust, it will be easier to delight in God's commandments. If I believe God will care for my every need without me needing to step in and take control, what can stop me from looking out for others? How could I not love God fully for such care? That kind of response comes from gratitude, and could never come from straight fear but instead comes from fear of the Lord.

So whatever came my way would be easier to distribute freely, to give to the poor. St. Francis of Assisi is a fine example. A son of an extraordinarily wealthy cloth merchant, for his faith he gave away the lucrative life of business his father hoped for him. When his father demanded he leave the notion of faith behind, Francis returned to him all the clothes off of his back. He gave up his wealth both literally and figuratively. Whatever he had from then on, he shared. In this way, he shared the light he had with all those he encountered.

God gives us each the light. Some of us shine our light like tea light candles, small and steady. Some of us give light like sparklers, bright and erratic. Our styles aren't what matters; the light matters. Have you seen the commercial that claims our eyes can see light in the darkness as far as ten miles away? While I can't know for sure about that distance, I know that a light in the distance is a light in the distance, no matter what throws that light.

God gives us each the light. I am amazed by the variety of television shows one can find on TV these days. On the Discovery Channel, there is a show called Dual Survival wherein two men with extraordinary yet different survival training are dumped, together, into some wilderness situation with a staged collection of items, suggested to be the things they were carrying on them when they "crashed" at

their location, or things left behind by other hapless explorers. Their aim is to survive with these seemingly useless items until they can either get to civilization or signal to those who can save them. I find this show absolutely fascinating and I hope to never, ever need to use any of the tips I've picked up in my occasional watching. To my memory, they seek to find a way to make fire in every single episode, many times before finding food or water. One episode in particular stuck with me.

Two items in their collection were a tin can and a cotton bandana. They built a fire using coconut husks and the old Boy Scout friction method of starting a fire but then realized they needed to move camp. Making fire in the primitive friction fashion is not easy and it helps to have the perfect conditions. Rather than hoping for favorable conditions a second time, they put holes in the can, put in some strips of the bandana, closed the lid, and then threw it in the existing fire until the heat inside the can caused the bandana to combust, creating a charcoaled ember which was transportable. They held this small fire with great care, with reverence. They made it so clear how precious this fire was.

God gives us each the light – do we treat it like as precious? Do we nurture it? Do we honor its life-giving and life-sustaining nature? By delighting in God's commandments, we tend our own God-given lights. We care for them to make sure that the light we reflect is one that points to God.

When we tend it, our goal isn't about making ourselves happy, as if deluded that we could bring about the wealth and riches. If we do tend the light for ourselves, for whatever reason, keeping it to ourselves is like hoarding it under a bushel basket: eventually it is smothered and dies, leaving it no good to anyone, not even ourselves. For light to thrive, it needs to be out in the open. In the gospel, the light goes onto the lampstand so it gives light to all the house, to the nations. Remember: distributed freely, given to the poor; all that goodness is given so that it is available to be shared. The young woman, Sarah, was remembered yesterday by many, many tales of how her light was freely given to those around her. She happened to be a sparkler.

This line of work has its privileges and one of those privileges is being part of more celebrations of life than the average person. I've heard people speak about those sparklers, about the way that those who knew them were touched. I've heard just as many people touched by tea light people, people whose light shone more quietly but yet still broke the darkness. Whether you are a tea light or a sparkler, don't put it under a bushel, keeping it to yourself. Give light to all those around you, in your house, in your job, in your circles, in your neighborhood. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Lord, our light is from you. May we make it for you as well. Amen.